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AUTHOR	Lachat, Mary Ann
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ABSTRACT

During the 1971-72 academic school year, a study was conducted which described and compared the attitudes of white high school seniors toward black Americans in three suburban high schools. These schools varied in terms of the possible interaction between black and white students as reflected in each school's racial composition, grouping procedures, and curricular options. The study compares the attitudes of high school seniors in an all white high school with those of seniors in two racially mixed high schools. It was hoped that the study would provide some insights about the effect of intergroup contact on attitudes. However, the study also examines the implications of findings which maintain that contact alone may not break down the stereotypes between the two groups if the contact occurs in situations where status distinctions are maintained. The study thus makes a distinction between an integrated setting which seeks to facilitate the positive interaction of a racially mixed student body, and a desegregated setting which is not characterized by practices aimed at fostering interaction. The attitudinal data strongly support the possibility that the efforts of the integrated district to provide a highly positive environment for black and white students had a positive effect on their attitudinal responses. (Author/JM)

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School Environments and Student Racial Attitudes

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by Mary Ann Lachat

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In contemporary America, the black American's quest for equality has been slow and agonizing. The racial struggles of the 1960's and the tensions that marked the opening of a new decade bore witness to the chasms separating the realities of black and white existence. The piecemeal dismantling of the racist *status quo* in American life has yet to dissolve the barriers that separate whites and blacks. Sanctioned by society, these barriers propagate the American racial dilemma and feed the myth of black inferiority. Paramount among these barriers are the negative racial attitudes and stereotypes that have stigmatized black Americans for generations. The roots of such attitudes and stereotypes have been nourished in the soils of fear, social mores, aggression, power, economic exploitation, sexual conflict and numerous other conditions. Indeed, the primary lesson of Gordon Allport's classic and comprehensive study of the nature and origin of prejudice is its plural causation.[1]

The pull of social conditions is significant for the formation and modification of attitudes. For the individual, his beliefs reflect either an endorsement of his group or an expression of conflict with it. Today, a white American's ideas about blacks can either reflect or plunge him into conflict with those who people his social world. An investigation of attitudes thus brings us to the heart of social relations.

During the 1971-72 academic school year, the writer conducted a study which described and compared the attitudes of white high school seniors toward black Americans in three suburban high schools. These schools varied in terms of the possible interaction between black and white students as reflected in each school's racial composition, grouping procedures, and curricular options.[2] The study compares the attitudes of high school seniors in an all white high school with those of seniors in two racially mixed high schools. It was hoped that the study would provide some insights about the effect of intergroup contact on attitudes. However, the study also examines the implications of findings which maintain that contact alone may not break down the stereotypes between the two groups if the contact occurs in situations where status distinctions are maintained. The study thus makes a distinction between an integrated setting which seeks to facilitate the positive interaction of a racially mixed student body, and a desegregated setting which is not characterized by practices aimed at fostering interaction.

The data reported in this study thus has two dimensions. The first dimension, the racial attitudes of the high school seniors, was determined through written responses to a questionnaire of belief statements. Quantitative measures were used to relate the observed variables, responses to belief statements, to the latent variable, attitude. A Likert scale of summated ratings was employed. The data were analyzed in order to describe and compare the range of positive and negative attitudes within and among the three schools. Also described are student responses to specific items on the questionnaire. The questionnaire contained belief statements related to attitudes toward whites as well as blacks. And, in the two racially mixed settings, the attitudes of the black high school seniors toward whites were examined as a factor which might be influencing white students' attitudes.

The second dimension of the data describes situational characteristics within each high school which could be affecting student attitudes. These included school philosophy, grouping procedures, classroom racial balance, staff racial balance, curricular and library offerings related to the black experience, and patterns of student interaction in the two racially mixed settings. These data were

Mary Ann Lachat, Ed.D, is a Research Associate with NCRIEEO.

obtained through interviews and observations.

The attitudinal responses from each high school showed that 71% of the seniors at Triville, the integrated high school, had scores reflecting favorable attitudes toward blacks; 55% of the seniors at Glaston, the all white high school, had favorable scores; and, 37% of the seniors at Liddon, the desegregated high school, had favorable scores. On the other hand, 35% of the Liddon seniors had scores reflecting unfavorable attitudes toward blacks, 13% of the Glaston seniors had unfavorable scores, and 8% of the Triville seniors had unfavorable scores. Thus, Liddon, the desegregated setting, was the school having the highest percentage of unfavorable scores, and the lowest percentage of favorable. At the other extreme was Triville, the integrated setting, with the highest percentage of favorable scores and the lowest percentage of unfavorable scores.

The very different attitudinal responses from the two schools with intergroup contact between blacks and whites prevent general conclusions about the effect of intergroup contact on students' racial attitudes. Recognizing that no simple cause and effect relationships can be drawn, the questions raised by the contrasting results necessitate an ultimate emphasis on the situational variables surrounding the attitudinal data. These variables provide a context for the attitudinal analysis, and document fundamental differences between the two schools. Such an emphasis reflects a recognition of the significance of the environmental settings which surround human behavior.

In his analysis of the culture of the school, Sarason pointed out that a stage, be it a theatrical or educational one, has "extra-individual" structured characteristics that affect the actors "even though they are unaware of these characteristics and their effects."[3] Sarason's view is the outgrowth of an ecological theory and methodology developed by Barker and his associates to study the relationships between real-life environments and behavior.[4] Their work indicated that ecology is a powerful factor in determining the behavior of individual persons. Pettigrew utilized an ecological approach in *A Study of School Integration: Final Report*,[5] citing the need to move beyond mere background variables such as education, religion, and occupational status. His study simultaneously used ecological and opinion data to derive a contextual explanation for behavior. The empirical findings of Kenneth Clark's appraisal of the evidence surrounding school desegregation throughout the United States suggest that individuals and groups modify their behavior only to the degree and in the direction demanded by the external situation as it is perceived.

Glaston, the all white high school, is a large high school with complexes stretching out from a central section. As one walks through the halls, there is a feeling of spaciousness, and the school's physical facilities are impressive. If one is pondering the situational implications of racial isolation in the schools, one has to be impressed by the sea of white faces passing in the halls. The only black person in the school is the head custodian. Interviews with staff members indicate that the social studies department offerings did not deal with the black experience, but some beginnings had been made to break down the sense of racial isolation in the school through curricular offerings in the English department. These efforts are only a beginning, however. Although the library at Glaston has a representative collection on the black experience due to action by the NAACP, the head librarian resents the collection, and students and staff are not making use of the collection on any consistent or comprehensive basis. There is no widespread awareness in the school of a need for providing students with a knowledge of or sensitivity to the nature of the black experience in America.

The attitudinal data strongly support the possibility that the efforts of the integrated district, Triville, to provide a highly positive environment for black and white students had a positive effect on their attitudinal responses. The situational variables surrounding the attitudinal results from the two racially mixed high schools should therefore be examined and contrasted.

Liddon and Triville are the two schools which at the same time were most similar and most different in this study. They serve neighboring communities, and the student population is similar in terms of ethnic groups and socio-economic levels. They differ, however, in terms of the conditions under which black and white students and staff may develop both cognitive and affective understandings of each other. And, the two schools are at opposite extremes with respect to the white high school seniors responses in this study. School districts differ greatly in their evolution from segregation through the desegregation process. Some, like Triville, consciously move toward the goals of integrated education where children are able to acquire understandings and respect for all ethnic groups. Moreover, all participants in the educative process, regardless of ethnic identity, have a status and play roles that are equal in power and prestige. Some, like Liddon, never achieve comprehensive desegregation in developing support and commitment, and operationalizing the goals of equal educational opportunity and mutual understanding between different ethnic groups.

Triville, at the outset, had a philosophy of commitment to integrated education, and sought to facilitate its implementation through a racially balanced staff and heterogeneous grouping procedures. Moreover, Triville's teachers were keenly aware of the district's commitment, and consciously grappled with the many problems inherent in the task. The teachers at Liddon, the desegregated high school, had little awareness of a school philosophy, and although most of them felt that their school was "integrated," their commentary did not reflect a conscious awareness of what the implications and manifestations of integrated education might be.

When one examines the curricular offerings related to the black experience or to black-white relations, the differences between the two schools are striking. The social studies and English departments at Triville have carefully conceived courses and units related to the black experience. Furthermore, the text of the interviews with the teaching staff reveal sensitivity and commitment to providing an education which reflects the ethnic diversity of the student body. Triville teachers expressed a desire to provide classroom encounters which would erase stereotypes and myths. They also acknowledged the importance of classroom encounters between black and white students.

The curricular offerings at Liddon on the black experience are largely unplanned, and the text of the interviews with the teachers reveals a lack of sophistication and commitment in treating these topics. Students at Triville are thus offered a curriculum which provides for the knowledge and classroom encounters which can erase stereotypes. Liddon students are not.

On several occasions in Triville, the writer witnessed classroom encounters between black and white students where racial issues were discussed openly and frankly. During her visits at Liddon, the writer never got a sense that teachers were prepared for this kind of interaction between students. It is difficult to document the subjective kinds of impressions one gets from spending time in a school. These impressions are significant, however.

Although black and white students socially segregate themselves in Triville, one does not sense hostility between the two groups, and one gets the definite impression of a setting where students have been provided with many positive possibilities for overcoming the negative attitudes and social barriers that have separated blacks and whites for generations. There is a high sense of awareness among the teachers of the immensity of their task, and their comments indicate a sensitivity to and respect for the black students. The writer did not find this sensitivity in the conversations with staff members at Liddon. Teachers at Liddon were open and responsive to the writer. Yet, one gets the definite impression that while black and white students are physically together in the building, little or no effort has been made to provide for their positive interaction and mutual understanding. The racial composition of the staff, the curriculum, and the library do not reflect the black students who attend the school each day, and neither classroom encounters nor extracurricular activities seem to offer possibilities for the black and white students to come together in a meaningful way.

Given the history of this country, there are many moral, philosophical, and sociological issues which are raised when black and white students are brought together or kept apart. The data reported in this study provides many insights about the race-related nature of student experiences in what has been defined as segregated, desegregated, and integrated settings. Of central consideration are the education implications for young people in those settings who will live in a multi-ethnic, interracial society.

(cont'd.)

Glaston was a white oasis where, until the recent efforts of the English department, the curriculum gave little or no recognition to the black experience in America. The writer is not suggesting that the sole purpose of education is to eradicate racial attitudes. Rather, she is questioning whether a segregated education which does not intelligently deal with a segment of the American people—who have profoundly influenced the development of this country—is a valid education. She is questioning whether an education which does not deal with the issues that cut deep into American society is a valid education. She is also questioning the motives of a staff which has almost totally ignored a library collection dealing with the black experience.

Liddon is a desegregated setting in the sense that black and white students had been physically brought together. However, the staff has not explored the possibilities inherent in that bringing together, and has made no effort to facilitate mutual understanding among students of different ethnic groups. The environments of individual schools and classrooms provide the most significant realities for defining the limits and possibilities of student and staff experiences. Black and white students sat together in classes at Liddon, but the school's philosophy, curricula, and staff racial balance represent a mentality almost as segregated as Glaston. The same questions raised at Glaston could be raised at Liddon. That is to say, is an education which in almost no way reflects the black students receiving that education a valid education? Likewise, is an education which does not facilitate the interaction of black and white students sitting in classes together valid?

The descriptive data on the curricular offerings, library collection, grouping procedures, and staffing patterns at Triville provide many insights into the possible components of integrated education. These components reflect the even more fundamental requirements of awareness, sensitivity, and commitment. Again relating to the implication of providing viable educational encounters for students who must live in a multi-ethnic, interracial society, the writer must conclude with her belief in the validity of Triville's efforts to: integrate its curriculum, library, and staff as well as the student population; provide content which would comprehensively and intelligently deal with the black experience in America; and, facilitate classroom encounters which would erase stereotypes and encourage mutual understanding.

Footnotes

[1] Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1958).

[2] Mary Ann Lachat, "A Description and Comparison of the Attitudes of White High School Seniors Toward Black Americans in Three Suburban High Schools: An All White, A Desegregated, and An Integrated High School" (unpublished dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1972).

[3] Seymour B. Sarason, *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1971), p. 104.

[4] Roger G. Barker, *Ecological Psychology* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1968).

[5] Thomas Pettigrew, *A Study of School Integration: Final Report.* Bureau of Educational Research, Office of Education, Washington, D.C., 1970.

NCRIEEO, Box 40
Teachers College
Columbia University
New York, N.Y. 10027

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